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ABSTRACT

Large numbers of foreign students attend United States colleges and universities, and the institutions can play a major role in facilitating the students' adjustment to life in a new culture. The foreign students' most common problems include homesickness, finances, housing and food, English language proficiency, understanding lectures and participating in class discussions, preparing written and oral reports, understanding American social customs, making friends, forming relationships with the opposite sex, and acceptance in social groups. The major variables affecting student adjustment are national origin, undergraduate versus graduate status, sex differences, marital status, and major field of study. Institutions can ease the adjustment process by making available English language instruction, orientation programs, counseling, host family programs, and programs linking foreign students with American student study partners. (MSE)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on
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Q & A

ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS

Q&A

Adjustment Problems of Foreign Students in U. S. Colleges and Universities

Prepared by Christine F. Meloni

According to the International Institute of Education, 336,985 foreign students came to study in colleges and universities in the United States for the 1983 academic year. This large number of such admissions testifies to the importance these schools attach to having such students on campus. Having admitted these students, these institutions can play a key role in facilitating the students' adjustment to life in a new culture.

What Are Foreign Students' Most Common Problems?

Many studies have been carried out to determine the major problems faced by foreign students. Even keeping in mind that individual characteristics can determine some of the problems students encounter, most studies agree that homesickness seems to rank as the most serious personal problem. Ranking next after homesickness are problems related to finances, housing, and food. Major academic problems include English language proficiency, understanding lectures, participating in class discussions, and preparing written and oral reports. Social problems usually mentioned are American social customs, making friends, relationships with the opposite sex, and being accepted by social groups.

What Variables Affect Student Adjustment?

Nationality. Studies have found that the national origin of the student does influence what a student's major problems will be. Of course, the characteristics of the institution will also make some difference (urban-rural, large-small, large city-small town). Nonetheless, there seem to be some trends.

Homesickness attacks everyone at some time. Beyond that, students from the Far East and Southeast Asia frequently list lack of sufficient English language proficiency as their overriding concern along with vocational planning and difficulty in making friends. They also sometimes perceive the community as being unfriendly, and a sense of social isolation can set in.

Africans and Latin Americans report major concern regarding grades. Like the Asian students, they also find it difficult to make friends and, in some cases, they perceive unfriendliness in the community.

Students from India and Pakistan list money as a major problem in addition to making friends and dating.

Academic issues are the overriding concern of students from the Middle East, Iran, and Afghanistan. Some problems are directly related to language proficiency, e.g., completing written examinations in the same time as American students, communicating thoughts in English, presenting oral reports, and taking notes.

Other problems may be more due to culture than to language. One of the most serious difficulties for many Arab students is written assignments. There is a strong emphasis in Arab culture on the verbal aspect of language, and, therefore, it is quite possible that Arab students, undergraduates and graduates alike, have never had a written assignment before coming to the United States.

Another academic problem that Arab students face is the course elective system. In the Arab educational system, each program of study is very structured with no choice of courses. Therefore, Arab students are not used to planning their own programs as American students are, and they become frustrated when their advisors leave the decision up to them as to what their course of study should be.

Arab students also have trouble with plagiarism, a totally new concept for them. They are accustomed to learning by making the knowledge of others their own without critical analysis. Consequently, they encounter difficulties in written assignments in which American professors expect them to distinguish between original ideas and information gained from other sources.

Undergraduate vs Graduate Students. Undergraduates have significantly more academic and personal problems (especially coursework, finances, and food) than graduate students.

Sex Differences. Levels of alienation seem to be equally high among male and female students, although among Afghans and Iranians, some female students experienced significantly more problems than male students. This finding may not be too surprising given the cultures from which these students come.

Marital Status. Married students seem to have fewer problems in all areas—academic, personal, and social.

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It has been hypothesized that students who are married and live with their families will be less socially alienated than unmarried students.

Major Field of Study. One study found that students who were majoring in the humanities or social sciences had significantly more academic problems than those majoring in the sciences and engineering. There were, however, no significant differences in their personal and social problems.

How Can Institutions Facilitate the Adjustment of Foreign Students?

Language Instruction. English language proficiency seems to be one of the major concerns of international students. As noted earlier, Asian students rate it very high, and students from the Middle East experience academic difficulties that are tied heavily to language proficiency. Most foreign students study English in their own countries and virtually all institutions of higher education in the U.S. require them to achieve a minimum score on a standardized test (such as the ALIGU, MTELP, or TOEFL) as a prerequisite for admission. It has been found, however, that English courses abroad frequently do not prepare students adequately for college-level work in the United States. Therefore, special courses in English as a second or foreign language should be offered by institutions that admit foreign students.

Orientation Programs. There is a great need for predeparture orientation programs for students coming to the United States. The following topics would be of primary importance: American culture, the American system of higher education, living and educational expenses in the United States, and immigration regulations. There is, of course, also the need for a series of orientation sessions on these or similar topics when students arrive on campus as well as for well-organized general orientation programs very much like those provided for all entering freshmen.

Counseling. It has been demonstrated that foreign students are under a great deal of stress as they try to adapt to U. S. culture; certainly, the difficulty in making friends is a contributing factor. They are unlikely, however, to consult psychologists or counselors for help in coping. Walter (1978) reports Sundberg's finding that "foreign students are more likely to seek other foreign students to help them solve personal problems than professionals, but other foreign students may impede the adaptation to the host culture and the individual's sense of independence." The problem, then, is what kinds of services can be provided to ease the stress before it becomes overwhelming. Certainly the foreign student advisor has a critical role in spotting the stress as it begins to build and in directing students toward outlets to help ease it.

Host Family. As is evident from the studies conducted to determine the problems of foreign students, social isolation is a major one. A host family plan in which an American family "adopts" a foreign student can give the student a sense of belonging to the community. The student may live with the family or may be invited to be part of family events or to simply visit the family regularly. Various organizations (e.g., Experiment in International Living, Youth for Understanding, and the Council on International Educational Exchange) have a successful track record in finding and preparing host families.

"Study-Buddy" Program. A "study-buddy" program initiated on the Duluth campus of the University of Minnesota seems to be quite successful. In this case, foreign students who need assistance with English or study skills are given an American student partner. It has been recommended that every foreign student be offered a mature student counterpart to provide encouragement in everyday situations.

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Resources

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